

To: Whom It May Concern

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Subject: The wording: “Caste, however, is a term that social scientists use to describe unbending social structure, for example, slave-holding society in the American South. . . .”

Historians of slavery and the ante-bellum American South do not equate slavery to a caste-like system for a number of reasons. Most importantly, slavery was in law and practice a system in which the enslaved were considered chattel property not only for purposes of taxation but also as an extension of the slave-holder's will. The enslaved had no rights as a human being and could be purchased and sold, punished or treated with a modicum of beneficence according to the whim of the slave-holder, and relegated to the status of a non-human in order to reserve all power to the master of the slave. Neither religion nor cultural forces offered fundamental protection to the enslaved; legally the enslaved could not testify in court against any white person, be educated or taught to read and write, hold property of their own; enjoy the ability to travel except at the direction of their owners; or enjoy family privileges or the prerogatives associated with marriage and parenthood.

For social scientists and historians of American slavery, the system of slavery could never be equated with a caste-like social structure because of the absolute non-humanity of southern slavery as a system of human relationships and culture. Scholars view slavery as a system of unfree labor, real rather than personal property (and thus akin legally to animals and things owned rather than personal possessions such as jewelry and books), subjects of absolute obedience to the will of the slaveholder and thus subject to social control and enforcement by the community and government, and a system of racial control that had little to do with an enslaved person's birth, religion, or family. Scholars also view slavery as a system that imposed significant psychological and cultural burdens on the enslaved fundamentally different from those existing in any system of free labor rooted in class or ethnicity. Nor do scholars who study the community and culture of the enslaved find reason to compare southern slavery to any system of free labor as a structural reality for the enslaved.

It is for the above reasons and based on my professional career writing and teaching about slavery that I find it gravely misleading to suggest that social scientists view slavery as social system similar to a caste system. The statement is both wrong-headed and gravely inaccurate. It reflects little knowledge of slavery and even less knowledge of any particular or general caste system as a social structure.

For scholarship on slavery that offers profound insight into how the system worked see John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*; Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American slavery and Russian Serfdom*; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*; Thomas D. Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619-1860*; and Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood*.